

Rural Public Transport: Room for Improvement



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
WEST MIDLANDS

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Getting about in rural areas is not a luxury. For the poorest and most disadvantaged it can be a nightmare. CPRE believes that everyone in the countryside, whether rich or poor, disabled or able bodied, old or young should have access to jobs and key services.

That means both protecting and enhancing rural services, such as post offices, shops, surgeries and schools, and providing better quality transport

services to meet the diverse needs of rural communities.

To assess the extent of the problem and how we might tackle it, CPRE undertook a survey of current trends and performance based on the Local Transport Plans of our rural Councils: Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Telford and Wrekin, Warwickshire and Worcestershire.



Ellesmere - Oswestry via St Martins low floor bus, Shropshire



Village Store and Post Office, Berkswell, Warwickshire



Stafford to Telford Ruraline bus service, Staffordshire
PHOTO COURTESY OF STAFFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

What is the Problem?

The rural areas of the West Midlands vary greatly. The remote parts of the Welsh Marches and the Peak District are very different from commuter belts in parts of Warwickshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire. But in all these areas, people often travel long distances to jobs and services because they have no other choice.

Though 89% of households own at least one car, it may not be available when people need it. It may be parked at work, for example. We estimate that on average less than 50% of rural residents actually have access to a car at any one time. Only 55% hold a driving licence, so a large minority depend on others for a lift.

The network of bus and rail services is also relatively sparse with much less frequent services than in urban areas. Many don't run at all on evenings and on Sundays. In some areas they are confined to busy routes between cities because other services are lightly used and uneconomic and therefore require heavy subsidy.

This tends to create a deprived underclass with only limited mobility, including many unemployed, elderly, children and disabled. They can become trapped in a vicious circle where problems multiply. Rising petrol prices may further increase the numbers of people relying on public transport.

We suggest that four key policy areas need addressing. All are important and we believe a strong mixture of interventions is needed to improve rural accessibility.



Scheduled Public Transport – the backbone of rural transport

The number of routes and the frequencies of scheduled bus services are in long-term decline in the rural West Midlands. Patronage is growing on some interurban routes (e.g. Stafford – Telford and Shrewsbury – Oswestry), but they are the exception that proves the rule.

Away from main roads, bus services often need circuitous routes to serve a sufficiently large population which makes them less attractive to use and to run.

Rural rail services have played an increasing role in both commuting and accessing services, particularly in local towns, but their penetration is limited to a few corridors.

CPRE believes scheduled public transport services will remain the backbone of rural transport provision and should be supported wherever possible.



Demand Responsive Transport – more planning and co-ordination needed

In the last decade transport services which respond to individuals' needs have grown. They range from scheduled bus services with flexible routes to demand-responsive taxibuses which collect people at or near their homes. Staffordshire, for example, supports at least six different types of service. Recent new initiatives include the Shropshire Link service also available across the county. There are many travel needs which they can meet more effectively than scheduled services.

However, they often require people to pre-register and book in advance. Eligibility criteria may exclude some important groups and these types of transport may not be available at all to people with access to a car.

Their rapid rise has also meant that coverage is patchy and they are not always well integrated with either scheduled services or with each other. Publicity can be poor. For example, in a recent

survey only 50% of North Warwickshire residents knew of the Beeline community transport service. The need for subsidies means they are particularly vulnerable to cut-backs.

Schemes run by the local communities to meet their specific needs tend to be more successful than those introduced from outside.

CPRE wants more effort by Local Authorities and other partners to integrate demand responsive transport services and to create more certainty about long term funding.



Location of Services and Facilities – local authority leadership and community involvement required

Many services are getting further away from rural people. 'Super hospitals' have been created in places like Coventry and Worcester. Rural post offices and pubs have closed. Even phone boxes are disappearing. Larger superstores have undercut local village shops. Rural school closures are regularly threatened.

Not enough consideration is being given in many commercial and public decisions to the wider community interest and the people affected are not being given enough opportunity to offer solutions to access problems. Internet and mobile facilities can help, and we support councils, such as Shropshire and Herefordshire, which are actively moving services into community settings, but the overall picture remains depressing. In our view local authorities should play a vital leadership role, bringing together service providers and transport operators, but this is as yet too little developed.

Market towns have a key role in concentrating services which cannot be provided more locally. Good public transport access to all our market towns from surrounding areas should be a high priority.

CPRE wants key decisions on rural services taken with full community involvement and providers of key services to have a duty to ensure there is adequate access from all rural communities.





The Need for Better Integration, with more demanding targets

In many instances, rural public transport services are planned and implemented in isolation. Tickets are often relatively expensive, through ticketing non-existent, services poorly timed for some people's needs with large gaps between services, and publicity limited.

We believe local authorities should take an overview, work with public transport operators to fill gaps, and bring together other providers. The aim should be a seamless offer to the travelling public. Where services rely on dwindling demand from those familiar with the route, effective marketing could capture new customers.

This integrated approach could also meet the needs of cyclists and walkers through the wider personal marketing approach successfully piloted in parts of Worcester.

To achieve this there need to be demanding targets which give planners and operators clear goals. Current targets include the number of people within 30 minutes of a market town or a major centre by 2010: 72% in Worcestershire, 69% in Shropshire and 64% in Staffordshire. Warwickshire and Staffordshire are also planning a 5% rise in bus passenger journeys by 2011, and Worcestershire, 1% although this includes many popular urban routes.

While these targets are welcome, they are not stretching enough and offer little prospect of a noticeable improvement beyond the status quo.

A higher proportion of resources will be needed to support rural transport if the goals set out in this leaflet are to be achieved. While some of this can be raised by Councils locally, the Government must also do more to ensure adequate funding.

CPRE would like to see a much more integrated approach to rural transport with a central role for Local Councils based on demanding targets for growth.

Conclusions

Rural residents deserve good access to jobs and services. The unspoken assumption that everyone in the countryside can get in a car is short-sighted when services in rural areas are being whittled away without adequate means of travel to alternative facilities.

Central Government needs to address the funding and competition rules which undermine joined-up public transport and community transport provision;

Local Authorities need to look for innovative and better coordinated ways of providing services in consultation with transport users.

Transport operators and service providers need to consider the implications of their decisions for the travelling public and particularly for those without access to a car.

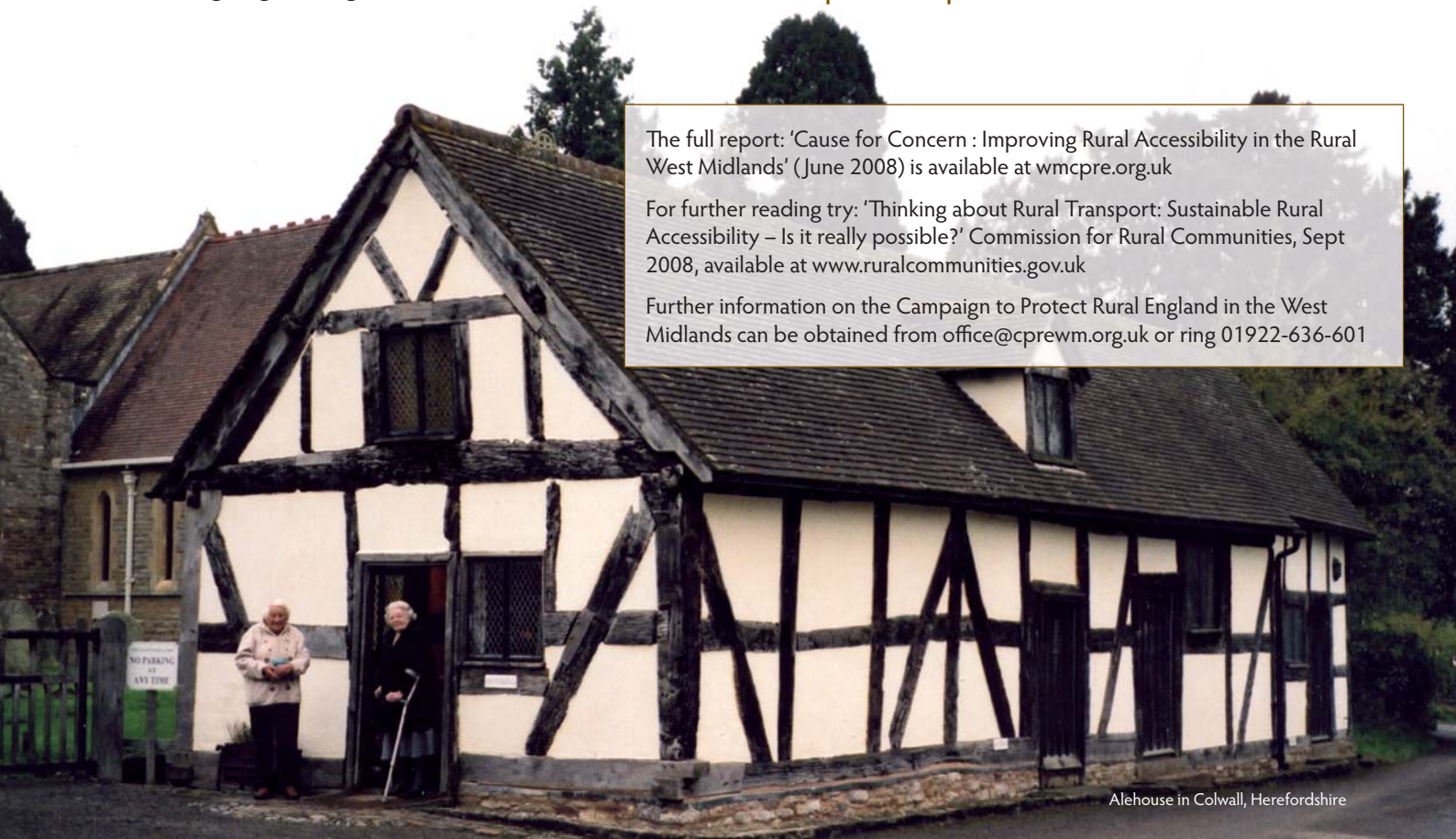
Practical measures to improve future performance:

- A strategic approach to rural services and public transport;
- Surveys of local transport needs;
- Surveys of demand responsive services to identify gaps;
- Fewer restrictions on who can use demand responsive services;
- Publicity and marketing of public transport services;
- Focus on market towns for major development and services which cannot be provided more locally;
- A leadership role for local authorities, bringing service providers and public transport operators together;
- A co-ordination role for local authorities to improve integration of scheduled and demand responsive services;
- More ambitious targets for the availability of rural public transport.

The full report: 'Cause for Concern : Improving Rural Accessibility in the Rural West Midlands' (June 2008) is available at wmcpre.org.uk

For further reading try: 'Thinking about Rural Transport: Sustainable Rural Accessibility – Is it really possible?' Commission for Rural Communities, Sept 2008, available at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Further information on the Campaign to Protect Rural England in the West Midlands can be obtained from office@cprewm.org.uk or ring 01922-636-601



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